

Penelope to Arachne: the stories weaving women tell

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In Greek and Latin literature, the weaving woman is usually a symbol of female virtue, but there is far more to these virtuous weavers than meets the eye: weaving becomes the means by which these women control and communicate, and their art may even be a metaphor for the very poems they inhabit. Through the image of the weaving woman, the poet explores the communicative power – and danger – of poetry.

Weaving – a sign of virtue or of danger?

Ask an ancient Greek or Roman about the ideal virtuous woman, and his or her answer would very probably say something about weaving – and not speaking – and not drawing attention by her behaviour. According to the Athenian statesman Pericles, for example, a woman's highest glory was *not* to be spoken about. Over-talkative (especially drunken) women, on the other hand, were figures of ridicule and contempt. In the ancient Greek and Roman world, weaving was an archetypal female activity, and the ideal of the virtuous woman was one who stayed at home in the evenings, soberly weaving by lamp-light and supervising her maids at their household duties. Yet in ancient poetry, the silently weaving woman becomes a dangerously ambivalent figure. She is an inscrutable presence in the heart of the home; her quiet weaving is symbolic of her unpredictable plans and motives, and she can use her craft to her advantage, either for control or for communication when no other means are possible. The weaving woman may even become a symbol for the poet, and a way for the poet to talk about the artist's role, and the power but also the dangerous risks of art.

Paradigmatic Penelope?

Penelope, the archetypal faithful and virtuous wife of ancient literature, is a rather more ambivalent figure in the *Odyssey* than this subsequent reputation suggests. During her husband Odysseus' long absence (ten years of fighting at Troy, followed by ten years of wandering in his attempt to get home again), Penelope manages the estate on Ithaka unprotected and ungoverned by any adult male rela-

tives. During this time, she fends off the advances of the roistering suitors who have taken up residence in her home on the assumption that Odysseus is now dead. But though she still hopes Odysseus may one day return, Penelope is careful not to offend anyone by outright refusal to remarry. It is a delicate position, not one she can sustain indefinitely: sooner or later, the suitors will require a decision. To buy time, Penelope makes the excuse that she is weaving a shroud for her elderly father-in-law Laertes – a filial gesture which the suitors cannot reproach; once she has finished weaving the shroud, she promises, she will decide which man she will marry.

Penelope's indeterminate behaviour with the suitors is frustrating for her son Telemachus, who is now reaching adulthood and can no longer endure the suitors' insolent encroachment on his home. Early in the first book of the *Odyssey*, he despairs of his mother's conduct:

'For all the greatest men who have the power in the islands... are after my mother for marriage, and wear my house out. And she does not refuse the hateful marriage, nor is she able to make an end of the matter...'

As far as Telemachus is concerned, Penelope is simply unable to make up her mind about remarriage – but he is wrong. As it is later revealed, Penelope may weave diligently by day, but each night she cunningly unravels the cloth again. What Telemachus views as indecision is in fact a diplomatic evasive strategy, designed to avoid angering the dangerous suitors, but also to postpone the decision Penelope does not want to make: Penelope uses her weaving to assert some control over a situation that is becoming critical.

The wily weaver of words: Penelope and the poet

But is there more to it than that? Penelope's strategy of postponement and delay through her repeated weaving-and-unweaving seems uncannily to mirror the compositional structure of the *Odyssey* itself, with its repeated deferral of Odysseus' homecoming, recognition, and revenge: consider how many times throughout the poem Odysseus comes very near to the brink of his return, only for some mishap to intervene to blow him off course again, or bring about some new disaster which prolongs his adventure. Even when he does eventually arrive home, he is disguised as a beggar, which postpones his actual recognition still further, as the poet draws out the suspense to near-breaking point. The close resemblance between Penelope's actions and the teasing narrative structure of the poem may prompt us to consider the possibility that her weaving has some deeper significance. And when we consider that weaving in ancient literature became a metaphor for poetic composition – poets were often thought to 'weave' their stories, like cloth – then Penelope's artful weaving could be seen as a metaphor for the art of the poet of the *Odyssey*; Penelope, in a sense, represents the poet within the poem. Her clever weaving-ploy aligns this apparently demure and dutiful woman with the great cunning hero of the poem himself, Odysseus of the many wiles, and also with the poet, the arch-plotter who skilfully weaves their narrative in the poem. In a similar example of poetic self-reference, Helen, in book three of the *Iliad*, weaves a tapestry which depicts the suffering of the heroes at Troy. The subject of her tapestry replicates the subject of the *Iliad* itself. Helen's tapestry, therefore, functions like an internal mirror of the poem, and Helen's weaving can, like Penelope's, be interpreted as a reflection of the poet's art. These women's weaving, especially Helen's with its martial subject-matter, seems to break beyond the boundaries of their domestic sphere, to control and comment on the world of the poem and even the art of poetry itself. Through their weaving, poetry itself becomes part of the fabric of

the heroic story of Troy.

Finding a voice: Ovid and Philomela

Ovid, the author of the Latin epic poem, the *Metamorphoses*, exploits the poetic symbolism of weaving in even more subversive ways. The two most famous stories involving weaving from Ovid's poem are the tragic tales of Philomela and Arachne in book 6. The Philomela story is a horrific tale of sexual violence and abuse. When Philomela goes to visit her sister Procne in Thrace, she is abducted by her sister's husband Tereus, imprisoned within a forest, and violently raped. In order to silence his victim and prevent her telling anyone what has happened to her, Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue, rendering her mute. But Philomela finds a way to communicate her gruesome ordeal: she begins to weave, and uses her skill to depict what happened in a tapestry which she shows to her sister Procne. Procne instantly understands, and together the sisters plot their grim revenge.

Although this story is extreme in its graphic violence, Philomela's repression 'speaks' on some level about women's experience in ancient society: women, like children and slaves, had no public voice, no direct access to power outside the home, and in a sense no 'right' or ability to speak for themselves. But Philomela successfully resorts to alternative means to tell her story: she weaves. Once we remember weaving's common use as a metaphor for poetry, Philomela's creative act takes on even deeper significance; her act of *weaving* her story closely mirrors Ovid's act of *narrating* her story in the poem. Once again, a weaving woman seems to represent the poet in his own work. Could Ovid be suggesting that poetry, like Philomela's tapestry, is a way to communicate thoughts, ideas, and experiences which one might not otherwise be allowed to express? Ovid was writing during the age of Augustus, like his epic predecessor Virgil, but his epic poem *Metamorphoses* gives a rather different message about the rule of Augustus; for example, whereas Virgil emphasized the enduring and glorious nature of Augustus' rule in the *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* emphasizes instead the ever-changing, unstable nature of things. Ovid also famously came into conflict with Augustus for his provocative poem, *The Art of Love*; as a result, partially, of this poem, Ovid was exiled to the Black Sea for the rest of his life, and the poem was removed from the public libraries at Rome. Read within the poem's political context, therefore, could Philomela's tapestry, a text which successfully communicates a story in spite of its author's violent suppression, hint darkly at the subversive power of Ovid's

own work?

A web of words: Arachne's spidery subversion

This is a theme to which Ovid turns in another story involving weaving women. This time, it is Arachne, an arrogant girl who is so famous for her magnificent skills in weaving that the weaving-goddess Athena becomes jealous and challenges her to a weaving competition. The goddess weaves a tapestry depicting the punishment of humans who disrespected the gods – an ominous warning for Arachne herself. Arachne weaves a magnificent work depicting the gods' mythical love affairs with human women and their fantastic disguises and transformations in their attempts to seduce and rape them – many stories which actually feature elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses* itself. The goddess, insulted and jealous, punishes the girl by transforming her into a spider; in a cruel twist, Arachne's weaving, which was once so marvellously expressive, is reduced to a spider's mechanical, endlessly repetitive but meaningless web-making.

Once again, it looks like Ovid is using Arachne's weaving as a way to talk about his own poetic craft, especially given that the subject of Arachne's tapestry so closely mirrors the subject-matter of Ovid's own poem, *Metamorphoses*. Poetry, Ovid suggests time and time again, is a dangerous business. Above all, the tale of Arachne expresses the poet's anxiety about how his work will be received; Arachne should perhaps have been more careful in her depiction of the gods, given that she was competing with a goddess, but poets release their artistic works into the world without knowing who might read them, and they cannot predict readers' responses, nor control how their work will be interpreted. The same is true for all art. To complicate matters further, Arachne's irreverent depiction of the gods in her tapestry appears even more insolent specifically when it is 'read' against the backdrop of Athena's weaving, with its message of righteous order and divine justice; it now looks as if Arachne is deliberately poking fun at the gods and ridiculing Athena's message. This demonstrates how new meanings, even ones never imagined by the author, can be revealed in texts when they are read with or against other texts. Given that all texts are constantly in 'dialogue' with other texts in the reader's mind, the possibilities are endless. The story of Arachne illustrates what a wildly uncontrollable thing art really is.

From Penelope and Helen of the Homeric poems, to Ovid's Philomela and Arachne, we cannot underestimate the quiet, subversive power of these weaving

women. At first glance, they may appear simply to be doing what virtuous women do – but dig a little deeper, and their weaving can be seen as a way of asserting control in a world where women had little, as a way of putting their stories on record, and a way to meditate on the fragility and vulnerability of the artist, but also the enduring power – and even the heroism – of the art.

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